

## United States Colored Troops in the Opening Assault on Petersburg

After the battle of Cold Harbor (May 31-June 3, 1864), Union troops rested and strengthened their earthworks. But within days, the Federal forces began moving again. Major General William F. Smith's Eighteenth Corps of the Army of the James was composed of three divisions of infantry, eleven artillery batteries, and a division of cavalry. The two divisions that were at Cold Harbor were marched to the east and sent by ship down the Pamunkey River and then back up the James. Smith was to assault Petersburg with his force on June 15, 1864. However, as is typical with moving large masses of troops there were problems in getting off for the assault on time.<sup>1</sup>

Brigadier General Edward Hinks led one of the three divisions of infantry in Smith's corps which was composed of two brigades of United States Colored Troops (or USCT) led by Colonel John Holman and Colonel Samuel Duncan. Holman's brigade consisted of two infantry regiments the 1<sup>st</sup> USCT and the 10<sup>th</sup> USCT. The 5<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry (this was a unit of black troops) was also attached to his brigade but were ill-prepared for battle. Duncan's brigade was composed of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 22<sup>nd</sup> USCT regiments. There were about 3,500 men in Hinks' division, some of those troops were born into slavery and others had not been.

About 5:00 a.m. on June 15<sup>th</sup>, the Federal cavalry pushed forward to screen the movements of the infantry. An hour later the Union cavalry ran into Confederate cavalry at Baylor's Farm. In that action, the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT lost some 120 men dead and wounded on the field. The 5<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry broke and ran, not having any previous experience in fighting dismounted. However, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> USCT overran the Confederate defenders and captured a Confederate artillery piece in this fighting that lasted two hours. By early afternoon, Smith's corps was outside Petersburg but were then under Confederate artillery fire from the Dimmock Line, a system of earthworks protecting Petersburg but at that time only defended by about 2200 Southerners led by Brigadier General Henry Wise.

The battle did not resume until 7 p.m. when Union artillery shells belched from the cannons toward Jordan House hill on the eastern side of Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> Between Batteries 6 and 7, the 1<sup>st</sup> United States Colored Troops rushed across the field. The regimental chaplain for the 1<sup>st</sup> USCT, Henry Turner described the fighting as such:

...away went Uncle Sam's sable sons across an old field nearly three-quarters of a mile wide, in the face of rebel grape and canister and the unbroken clatter of thousands of muskets. Nothing less than the pen of horror could begin to describe the terrific roar and dying yells of that awful yet masterly charge and daring feat. The rebel balls would tear up the ground at times, and create such a heavy dust in front of our charging army, that they could scarcely see the forts for which they were making. But onward they went, through dust and every impediment, while they and the rebels were both crying out -

"Fort Pillow!" This seems to be the battle-cry on both sides. But onward they went, waxing stronger and mightier every time Fort Pillow was mentioned. Soon the boys were at the base of the Fort, climbing over abatis, and jumping the deep ditches, ravines, &c. The last load fired by the rebel battery, was a cartridge of powder, not having time to put the ball in, which flashed and did no injury. The next place we saw the rebels, was going out the rear of the forts with their coat-tails sticking straight out behind. Some few held up their hands and pleaded for mercy, but our boys thought that over Jordan would be the best place for them, and sent them there, with a very few exceptions.<sup>3</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> USCT assisted men in Louis Bell's brigade of white soldiers in capturing Battery 6. The 22<sup>nd</sup> USCT drove into Battery 7 and captured the position quickly before turning against Battery 8. Battery 8 was perhaps one of the best situated Confederate positions besides Battery 5 for it was at the top of a high hill leading down to a deep ravine in front. Colonel Joseph Kiddoo, commanding the 22nd USCT wrote in his report, "The charge was made across a deep and swampy ravine. The enemy immediately ceased firing his artillery and took the parapets of the fort and rifle-pit as infantrymen. My men wavered at first under the hot fire of the enemy, but soon, on seeing their colors on the opposite side of the ravine, pushed rapidly up and passed the rifle pits and fort." The men in the 22<sup>nd</sup> were assisted by the 1<sup>st</sup> USCT and they carried Battery 8. However, the 22<sup>nd</sup> ran out of ammunition and had to halt their assault.<sup>4</sup>

The 4<sup>th</sup> USCT and a small portion of the 1<sup>st</sup> USCT pushed onto Battery 9 and 10, both of which the Confederates evacuated quickly in the face of the odds. The fighting of June 15, 1864 wrapped up at 9 p.m. Though Winfield Hancock's Second Corps of the Army of the Potomac reinforced Smith; but, Smith elected to stop the assaults that night. He defended his actions years later by writing, "I knew nothing of the country in front. My white troops were exhausted by marching day and night and by fighting most of the day in the excessive heat. My colored troops who had fought bravely were intoxicated by their success and could hardly be kept in order."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the move to Petersburg see Thomas J. Howe, *The Petersburg Campaign: Wasted Valor, June 15-18, 1864* (Lynchburg, Virginia: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, for general description of the assault at Baylor's Farm and battle plan for the assault outside Petersburg on June 15<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Henry M. Turner, "A Very Important Letter from Chaplain Turner," *The Christian Recorder*, July 9, 1864.

<sup>4</sup> *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington: 1880-1901), Series 1, Vol. 40, Part 1, 724-726; also available online <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moawar//waro.html>

<sup>5</sup> William Farrar Smith, *From Chattanooga to Petersburg under Generals Grant and Butler* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), 24-25, also available online [http://books.google.com/books?id=DbIEAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=William+Farrar+Smith&hl=en&ei=hZfmTbXSD-Xu0gGOIOHuCG&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAg](http://books.google.com/books?id=DbIEAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=William+Farrar+Smith&hl=en&ei=hZfmTbXSD-Xu0gGOIOHuCG&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAg)